

# Exploring Elementary School Children's Interaction at the School Threshold: Evidence From Athens, Greece

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## Abstract

The school entrance is one of the most important places in the everyday lives of children. As an intersection between school and public realm of the city, it is characterized by gradations of porous and rigid boundaries. Depending on its function, it can serve as a threshold or as a boundary. Additionally, it is a spatial condition that facilitates a dialogue between the school and the city and draws content from both. School thresholds are important in supporting the role of the school as an important node in the city and a bridge between children’s various everyday life dynamics by demonstrating meaning as a place that is open to the community as well as to possibilities and physical interaction. In this research, we examine the role of the “realm of the in-between” between school and city through the architecture workshops for children at an Elementary School in the heart of Athens, in which we explore children’s perceptions, wishes, and ideas related to their familiar everyday places of transition from school to city and vice versa. The aim of the research is to find out: (a) What is the role of school entry today? (b) What is the children’s perception of the entrance of the school? (c) What are children’s wishes in relation to the spatial transition from city to school to better meet their needs and desires? (d) What are the specific qualities of a school entry that render it an ideal space for the interaction between children and with the space around them? and (e) How does the synergy of cinematic-architectural tools feed, enrich, and open up new possibilities in understanding and representing spatial and social phenomena?

## Keywords

narratives; play; school boundary; school experience; spatial threshold

## 1. Introduction

This article delves into the significance of the often-overlooked school threshold, a space typically underutilized yet brimming with potential. Despite its dormancy, the school threshold holds promise as a

focal point for social interaction, facilitating connections among children, parents, the broader school community, and potentially extending to the neighborhood. Research underscores that such spatial configurations play a pivotal role in shaping social dynamics and community cohesion within educational settings (Alexander et al., 1977; Moore, 1986).

Recent research in Athens and broader Greece has extensively explored multidimensional aspects of child well-being, particularly studies by Leriou (2022, 2023) in Attica. These studies emphasize comprehensive assessments covering social, educational, and environmental dimensions, highlighting factors like access to educational resources, social support networks, and environmental quality, which significantly influence children's overall quality of life and psychosocial development (Leriou, 2019). Within educational contexts, the research accentuates the crucial role of school environments in fostering children's well-being, emphasizing the positive impact of environments conducive to social interaction and supportive relationships on emotional resilience and academic engagement. Furthermore, engaging children and other school community members in actively shaping their environment, enhances their sense of agency and belonging, critical factors linked to positive well-being outcomes (Hart, 1997; Mitra, 2004). This body of literature provides insights into how optimizing school environments can promote holistic child well-being in urban settings like Athens.

Utilizing a pedagogical research methodology, this study integrates cinematic and architectural tools alongside other expressive methods to explore the multifaceted dimensions of the school threshold. By engaging directly with elementary school children, the research aims to uncover their perceptions, ideas, and aspirations regarding this pivotal space. Literature highlights the transformative potential of involving children in participatory research, emphasizing their role as active agents in shaping their environments and narratives (Hart, 1997; Mitra, 2004).

## 2. Thresholds and Boundaries

School thresholds represent the school gate, creating space and possibilities around it. This study emphasizes social interaction, recognizing that space cannot exist in isolation from its social contexts; rather, it serves as a centrifugal force that molds interpersonal connections. Lefebvre's "The Production of Space" (1991) views space as a dynamic construct produced through social interactions, aligning with Massey's "For Space" (2005), which sees space as relational and constructed through social relations and power dynamics. Soja's "Thirdspace" (1996) and de Certeau's "The Practice of Everyday Life" (1980/1984) further emphasize space as an intersection of the physical, mental, and social, shaped by everyday practices. Within this framework, school threshold is both a product of social parameters and actions and a catalyst for events and actions. It is the place which visibly represents the idea of a welcome, the point where family and school life meet and overlap, encompassing the full spectrum of emotions, gestures, feelings, and thoughts. The smooth relationship between these two key worlds of most children, which shape their identity to a large extent, holds great importance for their emotional development and personality construction. Research, such as that conducted by Juvonen and Wentzel (1996), has illuminated a link between the establishment of educational confidence during formative school years and later academic self-esteem and performance. This highlights the pivotal role of the school threshold as a primary gateway shaping the educational experiences of children that have regular access to it.

This acknowledgment aligns with Zumthor's (2006) insight that our understanding of architecture is deeply rooted in our childhood and youth experiences. Childhood memories often revolve around vivid descriptions of the places that shaped them, playing a crucial role in the formation of individual identity and narrative consciousness. As Bachelard observes in his work "The Poetics of Space" (1994), childhood places act as paths for imagination and memory, shaping the personal and spiritual map of the individual.

The concept of the school threshold inherently sparks a dialogue and prompts contemplation about what lies "beyond," emphasizing the imperative for porous rather than rigid structures. This recognition underscores the notion that the school threshold symbolizes more than just a physical boundary; Serving as the interface between the school environment and its surroundings, the school threshold encompasses a spectrum of forms: ranging from distinct physical barriers to fluid, permeable transitions. It serves as a symbolic gateway inviting exploration and interaction between the school environment and its external context. Indeed, the essence of space transcends its physical attributes, as Bakema (Bakema, 1960–1961, as cited in Wood, 2019) contends, emphasizing the primacy of relational dynamics over materiality. De Carlo's (2004) assertion further elucidates this concept, framing the school threshold as a manifestation of transient structures shaped by human interactions.

The openness and porous nature of the threshold facilitate movement and flow between school and home, public spaces, and all other areas within the city that children regularly use, creating a sense of proportionality not based on strict equality, but rather on the recognition that both places constitute fundamental pillars of children's lives. Thresholds may vary significantly between different educational phases and spatial contexts, reflecting distinct developmental needs and environmental interactions at each stage. This approach also allows for the acknowledgment and accommodation of differences. Hardt and Negri (2005, as cited in Stavrides, 2018, p. 69) insist on the importance of constructing the crowd as a process that embraces differences while forging common ground for singularities. Massey's definition of threshold (2005) is also about its derivation from the interplay between people, with diversity as its cornerstone.

Consequently, the boundaries delineating school and home are not static but rather fluid and dynamic. This dynamic nature enables a comprehensive educational approach wherein students are viewed as integral components of a broader network of individuals. Such an approach spotlights the significance of interpersonal relationships in shaping learning and development, while also emphasizing the contextual factors influencing education, including the surrounding environment, cultural milieu, and community dynamics. In this perspective, both home and school serve as transient structural configurations rather than fixed entities. The threshold space, as Stavrides elucidates (2010), embodies a state of perpetual becoming, an unfolding canvas of spatial potentiality rather than a static, predetermined entity. This inherent characteristic defines its essence, facilitating an environment conducive to the fluid exchange and intersection of ideas. Functioning as a dynamic process, it inherently embraces the unpredictability of human interactions and the dialectic of contradictory forces, thereby embracing a full spectrum of possibilities.

Lynch (1971) further draws attention to the openness of thresholds, characterizing it as a behavioral attribute wherein a space is considered open if it facilitates unrestricted action. Openness transcends mere physical attributes and encompasses factors such as accessibility, ownership, management, and regulatory frameworks governing activities within the space. An open environment facilitates adaptability to users' preferences, needs,

and emotions, nurturing creativity, exploration, and experimentation, while remaining flexible and responsive to evolving circumstances.

Within this context, thresholds evolve into instruments for cultivating shared habits, daily rhythms, and regulatory frameworks, all subject to ongoing negotiation and adaptation. This dynamic characterization, as articulated by Massey and further contextualized by Lynch's conceptualization of openness, makes the multifaceted nature of thresholds clear. Moreover, the fluidity and adaptability inherent in thresholds allow for continual renegotiation of these norms, ensuring that they remain responsive to the evolving needs and aspirations of the individuals and communities they serve.

The school threshold embodies a pivotal role akin to a "landmark" within the educational landscape, echoing Lynch's concept in "The Image of the City" (1960/2008). Just as Proust's depiction of the bell tower (1913/2011) encapsulates the essence of landmarks, the school threshold signifies the ingress and egress from the educational domain. This attribute aligns with Lynch's notion of "imageability" in urban spaces, offering residents' whenever possible a sense of place, recognition and belonging, thereby enhancing the overall perception and acceptance of the educational environment.

Recalling Lefebvre's insights in "The Production of Space" (1991), the school threshold emerges as more than a mere physical or symbolic boundary; it embodies the intricate interplay between freedom and constraint, autonomy and surveillance. As roads intersect with this threshold, they shape the spatial experiences and ethical quandaries encountered by pedestrians. To further probe this intersectionality, we turn to Bourdieu's theories of habitus and social capital (1984) which offer perspective on how roads reflect and perpetuate social inequalities within educational settings. Sociology further elucidates how the school's threshold, as a locus of socialization and demarcation, mirrors broader social norms and power dynamics, with streets serving as both natural paths and symbolic representations of social order.

Indeed, the symbiotic relationship between a school's threshold and its urban context is profoundly shaped by diverse cultural characteristics inherent to each region of the world. As a result, the efforts to cultivating the advancement of a dialogue between the internal school environment and its external surroundings exhibit considerable variations. However, the inherent essence of the threshold concept lies in its evocative quality, summoning forth the notion of a pivotal point of convergence. As Hertzberger says (2011), the threshold is as important to social interaction as thick walls are to privacy. At the threshold, architecture's ability to form relationships in space multiplies. And yet, the school's threshold is in Greek reality a generally strict and impersonal boundary to and from the city, rather than a porous place of interaction. Down the line, the school environment will often tend to become shell-like, or as children frequently describe it in the words of a proponent of Freinet Pedagogy Babis Baltas, it can feel like a prison (Baltas, 2012).

Strict boundaries and fences are common for children growing up in Greece. In people's consciousness, boundaries are linked to security issues. Fenced, or at least clearly located play areas, make up the vast majority of places for children in the city. It is a practice that began in the early 20th century and became the norm in the planning of cities after the war, for reasons more regulatory than educational and this is quite symbolic of the contradiction in the place of children in the adult world (Katsavounidou, 2012). A similar dynamic is at play when considering school thresholds. Despite their intended purpose of providing a "safe" environment for children, these spaces often inadvertently reinforce prevailing power structures inherent in

broader society. While appearing to offer a sense of security, they may, in fact, sustain the very systems of oppression prevalent beyond their boundaries. Consequently, rather than serving as platforms for social change, they frequently serve to uphold existing social hierarchies.

Despite the postmodern emphasis on diversity and serendipity within urban planning, children's play and school environments often remain marginalized, relegated to isolated and enclosed spaces within the urban landscape. This compartmentalization starkly contrasts with the spontaneous nature of play, which thrives on unpredictability and exploration, unhindered by spatial boundaries (Katsavounidou, 2012). In essence, this segregation removes a vital component from the essence of play, depriving it of its intrinsic qualities. As Gadamer poignantly questioned, "Isn't it an illusion to think that we can separate play from the seriousness and allow it only in isolated areas peripheral to real life?" (Gadamer, 2013, as cited in Katsavounidou, 2012, p. 164).

In view of this, the threshold is essential for upgrading the lives of children living in cities and upgrading the city itself: An architecture of the threshold connects the school to the community and to life outside it. The school is no longer an isolated area amid the vastness of urban space but is rather linked to the city. It opens up; its activity becomes socially relevant and its cultural output is to be experienced by the community to which it belongs. In terms of a child's experience, this opening up of the school environment turns the city itself into a "big school" (Wood, 2019). Pupils become familiar with public space and connect with it on a personal level reclaiming a common ground that is freely shared among peers by means of their own spatial narratives. In thresholds, cracks emerge as disruptions to the established norms and organizational structures. These interstices, as delineated by de Certeau (1980/1984), signify the domains that elude the confines of rationalistic frameworks, posing a creative challenge to the ordered fabric of the urban landscape while engendering narratives, myths, and stories. Katsavounidou (2012) elaborates on this notion, identifying such spaces as *Spielraum*—realms that afford "room" for play, enabling maneuverability within the rigid technostructure of the city, which endeavors to dictate functions and behaviors to its inhabitants. de Certeau (1980/1984) characterizes the act of "disobedience" inherent in a crack as a process of "transcription," wherein the original symbolic and physical elements are transformed into something novel and unrestricted. Viewing the school threshold through the lens of *Spielraum* reveals its indispensable role in nurturing dynamism and vitality within the urban milieu. It serves as a crucible for experimentation, inviting exploration of diverse possibilities and advancing routes for creativity. Moreover, it offers a place for social connection, bringing forth the interconnectedness that imbues space with significance.

### 3. Research Inquiries and Methodology

The intrinsic characteristics of the spatial threshold have prompted a scholarly impetus for deeper investigation, with the aim of enhancing our comprehension and acknowledgment of its importance and potential. Below, I outline the key inquiries that I endeavor to address within the scope of my research, along with a brief overview of the methodology guiding the investigation. The aim of the research is to find out: (a) What is the role of school threshold today?; (b) What is the children's perception of the entrance-limit/threshold of the school?; (c) What do children want as they transition from urban space into that of the school?; (d) What are the specific qualities of a school entry that render it an ideal space for the interaction between children and with the space around them?; and (e) How does the synergy of cinematic-architectural tools feed, enrich, and open up new possibilities in understanding and representing spatial and social phenomena?

Through a comprehensive framework of research inquiries, one focal point revolves around the methodologies employed. A pedagogical approach, honed over an extensive period of eight years, has undergone iterative refinement to achieve a balance between robustness and adaptability. The methodology aims to provide a framework of comprehending children's requirements, inclinations, and aspirations concerning their surroundings. This framework offers utility to architects engaged in children's space design and also to educators seeking deeper insights into spatial cognition among children.

My approach forms a comprehensive framework that bridges various research fields, drawing inspiration from practices such as pedagogical documentation as implemented in the Reggio Emilia province of Italy (Clark, 2005) and Freinet pedagogy. These methodologies have extensively explored children's unique relationship with space and its role as a learning environment. Additionally, our research is influenced by the phenomenology of the body, as articulated by Merleau-Ponty (1962), which focuses on children's embodied interactions with their surroundings. Furthermore, we integrate insights from the Geography of Children that examines spatial concepts within their broader social, political, and cultural contexts.

Central to this approach is the creation of environmental conditions that enable children to feel safe in expressing their concerns (Lefevre, 2010). By treating children as experts in their own lives, many constraints on adults' efforts to comprehend children's experiences are lifted. This shift in perspective encourages mutual respect and understanding, promoting more meaningful engagement between adults and children in exploring their lived environments.

The age range under consideration in this study encompasses what is commonly referred to as "middle childhood." This demographic selection stems from a multitude of factors. It represents a transitional phase characterized by burgeoning cognitive and expressive capabilities, as children have acquired foundational literacy skills while retaining a degree of unfiltered spontaneity and imaginative fervor. Furthermore, this developmental stage aligns with a flourishing sense of autonomy and exploration, particularly notable among pre-adolescents and middle-school-aged individuals, who exhibit a heightened psychological attachment to their surroundings owing to their expanding mobility and independence (Katsavounidou, 2012).

Ninety third graders (aged 8-9) from an Elementary School located in central Athens constitute the focus of this research, conducted over a precise two-year period. This school was selected based on my prior engagement in conducting architecture workshops there. However, while this specific school serves as the initial setting, the research aims to extend beyond its confines and address broader issues within the context of urban Greece. Ethical guidelines were meticulously followed throughout the study, with ethical permission obtained from the school administration, the children and their parents or caregivers. The children were keen to participate in a project centered on their school, appreciating that their voices were valued.

One of the central concerns of the investigation was to allow the children to come to the fore, to make the most of their views and ideas, to "make them visible" as Baltas would say, never losing sight of a very important principle: namely that only if the city changes so as to conform to the needs of children will it be able to accommodate everyone's needs, a concept that so many thinkers tend to agree on. Malaguzzi (1993, p. 10) seems to provide ample defense in this when he insists that "our image of the child is rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent, and most of all, connected to adults and other children." Of course, it is not enough to observe children in order to understand how they engage with architecture, as they have a very

special way of experiencing their relationship with space. That is why we offer them the opportunity to express themselves using a variety of different media (the methodology incorporating multiple media was co-developed with Anastasia Noukaki, who is also a co-founder of our Athens Superscript team [Athens, 2015–2022]). As Goodman (1976, as cited in Bazaiou & Noukaki, 2017, 2018, 2019) has said, the world exists in as many ways as it can be described. The limits of our representational language also delineate those of the world of our ideas. Hence, the more means we can use to describe that world, the more information it will provide us. It is a game on the limits and limitations of each possibly independent method, in the course of which the experience of the children is constantly reflected upon and reevaluated.

The research process encompasses the following steps: Initially, the spatial experiences of children at the school gate, both at the beginning and end of the school day, are documented through a film directed by Anna Chrysanthakopoulou, Documentary Director and Archaeologist. Then, the children are shown the Observational Documentary and they are encouraged to express their thoughts and feedback by means of photovoice workshops, voting, answering questionnaires, creating architecture models. Rather than being based on a rigidly formulated working hypothesis, this particular approach creates a broad enough context wherein every child can find ways of expressing themselves adopting different angles and perspectives. Each approach provides a distinct route for participants to articulate their sentiments, preferences, and insights regarding the school threshold, deepening their involvement in the investigative process. By entailing a multiplicity of expressive modalities, the interaction between subject and representation is enriched, yielding subtleties of data and uncovering dimensions that might otherwise remain unexplored. Through these varied channels of expression, akin to what Eisenstein (1949/1994) described as “visual counterpoints” in cinematic imagery, participants uncover subtler nuances in their relationship with the school threshold. The spatial experience of the threshold intertwines with its representation as an image, creating a connection characterized by complementarity rather than rivalry. This dynamic entails an exploration of the boundaries and constraints inherent in each method, with a continual process of reflection and reassessment informed by the children’s experiences. Cinema in this research is present in four different ways:

1. The creation of children’s observation film;
2. The processing of film with tools other than the film language;
3. The processing of film with tools within the filmic language;
4. The completion of the film with a selection of data from the entire research.

Within our research, the cinematic image serves as a powerful educational instrument for comprehending space and its utilization by individuals. By combining visual imagery with sound, we create a rich multisensory experience, particularly impactful for children as it captivates their interest and facilitates learning. In a counterpoint to Debord’s cinematic language (1967/1995), which often emphasizes the construction of visual and narrative elements to critique modern society, the audiovisual urban landscape (school threshold) serves as a starting point for children to observe the spatial experience of the threshold. This approach enables us to observe children’s behavior in their environment in a manner that is more natural and spontaneous than traditional observation methods allow. Utilizing cinematic tools, we can analyze various facets of children’s interaction with space, including their mobility, interactions with their surroundings, engagement with peers and adults, and preferences for different areas and objects within their environment.

Cinema can capture subtle qualities and make dynamic use of symbolism. And while images alone do not contain all meanings, montage editing creates synthesis and meaning. Cinematic tools provide children with the means to engage in a two-dimensional editing process, allowing them to craft their own narratives. Photovoice exercises are an easy way of utilizing the cinematic image, without requiring special technical means and skills (Wang & Burris, 1997). At the same time, they encourage participants to pay attention to details that otherwise may have gone unnoticed. Children get their hands on frames of our documentary “On the school threshold” in the form of printed photographs and are asked to edit them in an order of their choice, creating the narratives they wish to happen on their school’s doorstep, adding script and sounds to the individual video frames that they would ideally like to hear. These narratives allow participants to weave stories that provide context and emotional depth to their experiences, working on variations of the observed reality. They are an approachable way to utilize the cinematic image—reminiscent of Barthes’ (1977) exploration of narrative structures, which enables us to present and comment on our subject (the threshold) without requiring special technical means and skills.

Children also complete Likert scale questionnaires and participate in polls to gather both quantitative and qualitative statistical data regarding their preferences and sentiments concerning the threshold (Likert, 1932, as cited in Spector, 1992). Likert questionnaires delve into how kids feel and what they think about these spaces. With a structured scale for sharing preferences and feelings, we can gather information for analysis that help us understand better how school thresholds affect kids’ happiness and well-being.

Furthermore, voting exercises are administered using various photographs depicting school thresholds from different regions globally. Participants are asked to indicate their preferences regarding the activities conducted within these spaces, such as play, socializing with friends, interactions with parents/caregivers, engagement with natural elements, interaction with art objects (sculptures), and exhibition of school work, as well as their aesthetic preferences.

Regarding the construction of the architecture model, participants are provided with a diverse array of materials, including cardboard, pieces of old toys, wire, thread, wood, and branches, for the construction of architectural models. They are given instructions that allow for significant freedom of movement and choice during the construction process. These architectural models help children to translate their perceptions into tangible forms (Piaget, 1952). They facilitate the communication of ideas in a spontaneous manner, enabling participants to visualize their designs and assess the feasibility of their proposals. The emphasis is placed on flexibility, freedom, and convenience and on the expression of ideas rather than on achieving construction perfection.

The spatial experience of the threshold intersects with its portrayal as an image. By engaging children’s tactile senses and allowing freedom in expression through storytelling and reshaping film narratives, this approach mitigates the risk of data being biased or predetermined, as observed by Katsavounidou (2012) in discussions on childhood. It also avoids establishing a dominant relationship between the researcher and the participants, as commonly seen in interview-based or observational research methods. Furthermore, this method diminishes the possibility of children’s participation devolving into a competition for realistic depictions, as might occur in drawing or painting exercises. It is also a fact that each representational medium has its inherent limitations. In spite of that, critics may argue that the mediation of representational media in research introduces subjective interpretations of reality, thereby questioning the objectivity of the



findings. However, the utilization of diverse modes of representation has become increasingly prevalent in contemporary research practices. Scholars like van Leeuwen and Kress (2006) have emphasized how different modes of research offer distinct semantic sources, enabling researchers to interpret and convey meanings in varied ways. The simultaneous and systematic integration of various optical and acoustic media operates on the principle of leveraging the unique capabilities of each medium and harmoniously combining them based on complementarity rather than competitiveness. This approach necessitates a shift in perspective, moving fluidly between experiencing space and representing it. The process facilitates the translation of spatial experiences into narrative forms and vice versa. The process involves experiencing space first-hand and then translating that experience into narrative forms, thereby facilitating a deeper understanding of spatial phenomena.

Through multidimensional analysis, space and its boundaries are investigated across three dimensions, reminiscent of Rohmer's exploration in his book "The Organization of Space in Murnau's Faust" (Rohmer, 2000) of different spatial constructs within cinema:

**Architectural Space:** This encompasses the physical and social dimensions of space, including its built environment and urban landscape. Additionally, it considers the interactions between individuals and their environment, as well as the experiences and social dynamics shaped by architectural design.

**Cinematographic Space:** Referring to the spatial composition within cinematic images, this dimension focuses on elements such as shot size, depth of field, and the arrangement of objects within the frame. It explores how visual elements are structured to convey spatial relationships and evoke particular moods or atmospheres.

**Narrative Space:** This dimension pertains to the mental space constructed through storytelling, whether conveyed orally, in written form, or through design and construction. It involves the creation of imaginary or conceptual spaces within narratives, shaping the audience's perception and understanding of spatial contexts.

Research conducted within the realms of narrative media interpretation may not always occur within a strictly controlled or objective environment, unlike studies conducted in laboratory settings. However, it offers the advantage of encompassing a broad spectrum of disciplines and fields. Engaging children in various modes of representation and expression, prompts them to explore different aspects of their experiences and encourages reflection on multiple levels, thereby deepening their engagement with the research process. In essence, this approach transcends mere data collection; by analyzing space through these dimensions, we gain a comprehensive understanding of spatial phenomena, considering both physical and conceptual aspects across different mediums and contexts.

All collected data are analyzed to identify recurring themes, patterns, and emotions that emerge throughout the research process. The analysis of children's responses revealed several recurring motives, summarized as follows:

1. Children perceive cars as integral to their environment and envision playing on the road only in the presence of vehicles. One child mentioned: "I like it when we play near the street because we can see the cars passing by. It makes our games more exciting."

2. They express a desire for natural elements, particularly trees, within their surroundings. A girl noted, “I wish we had more trees around our school. It would be so cool to have a treehouse or just sit under the shade.”
3. The specific form of the threshold is of little concern to them, as long as it facilitates free play and social interaction with peers.
4. Children exhibit a desire for novel and adventurous ways to navigate the threshold, such as climbing, floating, or creeping. “We should all enter school by jumping from the outside using a trampoline and entering from the top of the door,” a girl suggested.
5. Many of the games they invent involve imaginative methods of entering the school, such as passing through rollers or solving puzzles.
6. Interacting with members of the neighborhood community is valued, and children express interest in showcasing their work through exhibitions on the threshold.
7. Meeting friends at the entrance holds significance for children, resembling familial interactions, enhancing the sense of intimacy.

While these seven themes were identified, not all of them were equally emphasized by the children. Themes such as the desire for natural elements and imaginative games for entering school were more frequently mentioned, indicating their higher importance in the children’s spatial experiences. The emphasis on green spaces aligns with the increasing recognition of nature’s role in child development, as discussed by Louv (2008). Additionally, the creative suggestions for navigating the threshold reflect the significance of play, supporting the findings of Ginsburg (2007), Pellegrini and Smith (1998), Frost et al. (2001), as well as earlier contributions by Gadamer (1960/2004), Piaget (1962), Vygotsky (1978), and Bruner (1976) on the crucial role of play in healthy child development.

The final stage of representation in the research involves synthesizing elements from the workshops, projects, and children’s wishes and incorporating them into a film as a complex array of sounds, static and moving images, depicting the entire four-year research process. The diverse interpretations from each student, expressed through various means, along with reflective analyses, reveal both structural consistencies and inconsistencies. The depiction of the school entrance aims to serve as a focal point for words, actions, thoughts, and interpretations, weaving them into a cohesive narrative. Through montage editing, the film composition manipulates, enhances, and juxtaposes elements to create rhythm and coherence. The research methodology thus encompasses aspects of play, navigating between scientific discourse and subjective representations, and employing tools from both architecture and film. The experience and its representation alternate with a movement reminiscent of rhythm, which could be likened to the “back and forth” movement that, according to Gadamer (1960/2004), is playing’s constituent “mode of being.”

These approaches have been informed by various strands of literature and were shaped through extensive trial and error over eight years of conducting architecture workshops with children of this age. The methodological framework draws on insights from scholars such as Lefebvre (1991) in his exploration of the social production of space, van Leeuwen and Kress (2006) in their work on multimodal discourse analysis, Rohmer (2000) in his study of cinematic space, and Bordwell and Thompson (2013) in their analysis of film art and narration. The coding of the collected data was conducted by me, meticulously analyzing the children’s responses, workshop outcomes, and creative outputs. The thematic analysis was informed by

Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines, which emphasize the importance of a systematic approach to identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data.

#### 4. Conclusions

Through the research, we observed the children, gave them opportunities to express themselves through the combination of cinematic and architectural tools and clarify their perception and desires in relation to the school entrance. Workshops activate the imagination, operating on the belief that the world can change from the bottom up through the synergy of myth-making and realism.

Through the study, a reflection is proposed on the concept of the school threshold as a condition that helps the school to claim its openness, the relationship with the urban space. In order to maintain a lasting connection between school and community-society, the threshold is an important place to disseminate children's activities to and from the city. The interaction with the threshold opens up opportunities for exploration, randomness, adventure, street stories, that all contribute to building a more integrated relationship with the elements surrounding us. The threshold can provide conditions for free, unplanned play with peers, the revival of the streets and the right to the street as a "playing field," the space in which children look for each other for play, observation, socialization. On this social basis, school becomes an essential place of active social life and not just a place where the child "learns things," opens up to the outside and possibly to the inside. The expanded school environment becomes a place of cooperation, communication, interaction and teamwork, comes out of isolation and ensures an organic relationship with social life.

When comparing the experiences of adults and children as creators, it becomes evident that children possess a unique ability to engage with space unencumbered by the complexities and responsibilities that often weigh on adults. Freed from emotional and mental burdens, children approach the exploration of space with a sense of curiosity and openness, expanding the possibilities for creative interaction. While engaging with children may lead to uncertainty, embracing this uncertainty can catalyze a transformative process for architects, fostering a fresh perspective on evaluating spatial environments and contributing to their professional development. As Hart (1997) suggests, in societies where adults struggle to effect significant change, young people have the potential to instigate profound shifts. Similarly, Rodari (1973/1996) emphasizes the importance of not underestimating children's capabilities, highlighting their innate sensitivity and authenticity in their approach to thinking about space. Children prioritize elements such as storytelling, play, interaction, and well-being when considering space, thereby honing in on the fundamental essence of architecture, which resonates with the essence of human existence.

Children's innate ability to engage with space through play is a recurring theme in our research, echoing Michel de Certeau's (1980/1984) notion of spatial narratives woven through everyday practices. By engaging in spatial play, children reshape the urban landscape to suit their perspectives, transforming perceived boundaries into negotiable zones of exploration. They gravitate towards informal, undefined spaces that afford them the freedom to shape their play experiences—an embodiment of Maria Montessori's concept of "spontaneous self-development" (Montessori, 1949/1966).

The research findings accentuate the dynamic nature of spatial experience, emphasizing its emergence through human interaction and collective bricolage rather than predetermined form. The threshold, in this

context, serves as a locus of creativity and boundary-challenging, generating new narratives and responses that challenge established norms and boundaries. Those changes do not have to be big or radical. Small cracks to the edifice of urban normality will do the job, as long as they are capable of creating nuclei of spatial freedom which gradually put children on an equal, if not a higher, footing with adults as users of urban space. It is a step in the direction of turning schools from centers where society is reproduced—as Dewey would say (Benson, 2017)—into the hotbeds of its transformation.

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### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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### About the Author



**Natalia Bazaiou** has over 20 years of professional experience and specializes in understanding children's interactions with the urban environment. As a co-founder of Athens Superscript, she designs and implements tools for interpreting and transforming public spaces to create child-friendly urban networks. Her research projects, carried out through participatory workshops, focus on converting cities into inclusive learning environments. Additionally, she provides training for primary school teachers in architecture and pedagogy. Her methodologies have been featured at international conferences and published in academic journals.